

Chicago, IL --- I have been asked today to "reflect on the meaning of Dr. King's life and his role in the civil rights movement." I respect this legitimate request, but I also have two small problems with it. (1) I'm tired of "reflectors" interpreting Dr. King instead of allowing Dr. King to speak for himself; and (2) I've grown to see Dr. King as a *world HUMAN rights* leader not just an *American CIVIL rights* leader. So today I want to let Dr. King speak for himself and let all of us reflect on his 1960's words in our 2006 context.

As a *WORLD HUMAN RIGHTS leader*, the best summation of Dr. King's teachings is "The World House" chapter in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* It was based on Dr. King's Nobel Peace Prize lecture, delivered at the University of Oslo on December 11, 1964. Dr. King worked on it for nearly a month and gave it prominence as the concluding chapter in his book, which described the daunting challenges we face. He may well have regarded it as his most important single speech or essay, but it's less well-known than his *American civil rights* contributions, "I Have A Dream" and his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

In this speech Dr. King addresses many of the issues current to his day - e.g., Vietnam and South Africa. But his words were much more all encompassing - *and may be even more relevant for today* ! He urges us to: (1) transcend tribe, race, class, nation, and religion to embrace the vision of a World House; (2) eradicate at home and globally the triple evils of racism, poverty, and militarism; (3) curb excessive materialism and shift from a "thing"-oriented society to a "people"-oriented society; and 4) resist social injustice and resolve conflicts in the spirit of love embodied in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence. He advocated a Marshall Plan to eradicate global poverty, a living wage, and a guaranteed minimum annual income for every American family. He urged the United Nations to experiment with the use of nonviolent direct action in international conflicts. And the final paragraph warned of the "fierce urgency of now" and cautioned that this may be the last chance to choose between chaos and community.

While Dr. King was primarily addressing the "fear issue" of his day - "communism" - we might want to add or substitute the words "terrorism" and "religious fanaticism," and look both at *home* and abroad for examples. [JJJr say the following humorously] I assume President Bush has ordered the National Security Agency to spy on my speech today so he can give the Rev. Pat Robertson a copy - if you get my drift on this point.

Today, rather than *my* reflecting and interpreting Dr. King, I want to let Dr. King speak for himself, selectively, and *challenge you* to reflect and interpret his words for yourself. [I have provided your staff with Dr. King's full text, which they can copy for you if you desire. I would encourage you to read it in its entirety.]

What did Dr. King have to say to the world? "Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: 'A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.' This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together-black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu-a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

"However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war.

"All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors. This world-wide neighborhood has been brought into being as a result of the modern scientific and technological revolutions. The world of today is vastly different from the world of just one hundred years ago....The years ahead will see a continuation of the same dramatic developments. Physical science will carve new highways through the stratosphere.

"Along with the scientific and technological revolution, we have also witnessed a world-wide freedom revolution over the last few decades....In one sense the civil rights movement in the United States is a special American phenomenon which must be understood in the light of American history and dealt with in terms of the American situation. But on another and more important level, what is happening in the United States today is a significant part of a world development....What we are seeing now is a freedom explosion, the realization of 'an idea whose time has come,' to use Victor Hugo's phrase. The deep rumbling of discontent that we hear today is the thunder of disinherited masses, rising from dungeons of oppression to the bright hills of freedom. In one majestic chorus the rising masses are singing, in the words of our freedom song, 'Ain't gonna let nobody turn us around.' All over the world like a fever, freedom is spreading in the widest liberation movement in history. The great masses of people are determined to end the exploitation of their races and lands. They are awake and moving toward their goal like a tidal wave. You can hear them rumbling in every village street, on the docks, in

the houses, among the students, in the churches and at political meetings.

"These developments should not surprise any student of history. Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh's court centuries ago and cried, 'Let my people go.' This was an opening chapter in a continuing story....Nothing could be more tragic than for men to live in these revolutionary times and fail to achieve the new attitudes and the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands.

"One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of the status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change. The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools.

"We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress. One of the great problems of mankind is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually.

"Every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live....Western civilization is particularly vulnerable at this moment, for our material abundance has brought us neither peace of mind nor serenity of spirit.

"This does not mean that we must turn back the clock of scientific progress. No one can overlook the wonders that science has wrought for our lives....But our moral and spiritual 'lag' must be redeemed. When scientific power outruns moral power, we end up with guided missiles and misguided men. When we foolishly minimize the internal of our lives and maximize the external, we sign the warrant for our own day of doom."

In light of the continuing racial insensitivity and poverty re-exposed in the Gulf region of our country around Hurricane Katrina, the current Iraqi war and a new foreign policy doctrine - starting "pre-emptive wars" - what did Dr. King have to say about the issues of racism, poverty and war and peace?

## **I. The evil of racism**

"Among the moral imperatives of our time, we are challenged to work all over the world with unshakable determination to wipe out the last vestiges of racism....Racism is no mere American phenomenon. Its vicious grasp knows no geographical boundaries. In fact, racism and its perennial ally-economic exploitation-provide the key to understanding most of the international complications of this generation.

"Nothing provides the Communists" - or I would add "terrorists" and "religious fanatics" - "with a better climate for expansion and infiltration than the continued alliance of our nation with racism and exploitation throughout the world....Everywhere...one finds a tremendous resentment of the United States, and that resentment is always strongest among the poorer and darker peoples of the continent.

"Once the aspirations and appetites of the world have been whetted by the marvels of Western technology and the self-image of a people awakened by religion, one cannot hope to keep people locked out of the earthly kingdom of wealth, health and happiness. Either they share in the blessings of the world or they organize to break down and overthrow those structures or governments which stand in the way of their goals.

## **II. The scourge of poverty**

"Another grave problem that must be solved if we are to live creatively in our world house is that of poverty on an international scale. Like a monstrous octopus, it stretches its choking...tentacles into lands and villages all over the world. Two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed and shabbily clad. Many of them have no houses or beds to sleep in. Their only beds are the sidewalks of the cities and the dusty roads of the villages. Most of these poverty-stricken children of God have never seen a physician or a dentist.

"There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it....Today, therefore, the question on the agenda must read: Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?...There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will.... The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty. The rich nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled and feed the unfed....The first step in the world-wide war against poverty is passionate commitment.

"A genuine program on the part of the wealthy nations to make prosperity a reality for the poor nations will in the final analysis enlarge the prosperity of all....From time immemorial men have lived by the principle that 'self-preservation is the first law of life.' But this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves....We are in the fortunate position of having our deepest sense of morality coalesce with our self-interest.

"But the real reason that we must use our resources to outlaw poverty goes beyond material concerns to the quality of our mind and spirit. Deeply woven into the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God, and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value. If we accept this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with ill-health, when we have the means to help them. In the final analysis, the rich must not ignore the poor because both rich and poor are tied together. They entered the same mysterious gateway of human birth, into the same adventure of mortal life.... In a real sense, all life is interrelated....Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

### **III. Finding an alternative to war**

"A final problem that mankind must solve in order to survive in the world house that we have inherited is finding an alternative to war and human destruction. Recent events have vividly reminded us that nations are not reducing but rather increasing their arsenals of weapons of mass destruction....So when in this day I see the leaders of nations again talking peace while preparing for war, I take fearful pause....One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means....Therefore I suggest that the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict, by no means excluding the relations between nations....It is not enough to say, 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the eradication of war but on the affirmation of peace.

"The stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth....When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered....A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring....A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.

"These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the earth are rising up as never before....A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies...This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men....This often misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man....This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another: for love is of God: and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love....If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us."

## **Conclusion**

Thank you Dr. King for speaking to us in your own words today. Help us to reflect upon them and interpret them in a way that will help both to build a more perfect Union and a more perfect world.